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ABSTRACT

A cultural awareness curriculum was implemented in one multicultural kindergarten class in a Los Angeles suburb school. The project, intended to foster ethnic pride and reduce ethnic prejudice, began the first week of school and extended for 2 months. Four behavior patterns were addressed: (1) positive sense of self; (2) positive self-other relationships; (3) positive cultural attitudes; and (4) collaborative relationships between different cultures. Activities that nurtured children's positive sense of self included reading books about different heritages, challenging students to play with other, different-looking students, preparing students' biographies written and illustrated by classmates, and headlining one child as a "Star of the Week." To foster self-other relationships, projects focused on helping students to recognize commonalities as well as differences. Activities included daily journal writing, directed dramatic play, verbalizing conflict resolution methods, reading subject-related books, and measuring and comparing physical differences and similarities in math and science projects. To encourage positive cultural attitudes, teachers used a game of examining the differences and similarities of students' shoes, thus bringing the class to recognize that they are both different and the same. To promote cultural collaboration, teachers invited parents to participate in examining different cultures; parents brought material from home and presented short lessons about themselves and their culture. As a culminating activity, the class prepared a culture quilt, with each student's portrait on a square of felt that each child determined matched his or her skin color. (Contains 12 references.) (DLH)

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Cultural Awareness Education in Early Childhood Education

A paper presented at the 54th Annual Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Conference: San Francisco, CA: March 7, 1999

By Maggie Anicich and Rea Kirk

Research and our experiences inform us of the vital nature of cultural awareness education. Swick, Boutte, and Van Scoy (1996) remind us of the rise in hate groups and hate crimes, and of the increasingly distorted perception of people of different cultures. Banks and Banks (1997) discuss the institutionalized practices within our society which promote divisiveness amongst us. Educators need to counteract these trends. Swick, Boutte, and Van Scoy tell us that schools need to take on an important task , that—as educators—we have a strong effect on children's multicultural development. It is up to us whether this effect feeds into the above-mentioned trends--if we reinforce isolation and ignorance and cruel tradition, or if we reverse the trends through appropriate cultural awareness education. As kindergarten co-teachers, we wanted to be among those who reversed those trends.

Located in a Los Angeles suburb, our kindergarten class confronted the silence of racism and discrimination. African, African-American, Asian-American, Middle Eastern, Indigenous American and European-American children studied and demystified their human differences and biases. We also identified and named our commonalities.

Cushner (1999) informs us that culture is made by human beings and because of our culture, we come to believe that there is one correct way to think, be and do. Often these beliefs are implicit and unspoken. Often, as Cushner reminds us, these beliefs are hidden from consciousness. The students in our class learned to openly verbalize fears,

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feelings and prejudices, breaking the hold on their young minds. Through thematic learning and exploration, our children gained power to choose how they think and feel about each other. They learned to no longer base their friendships, let alone their perceptions, on who most looks like them.

Banks and Banks (1997) tell us that to teach with excellence, we must affirm our students' diversity. We attempted to do so with the project explained below.

During the first week of school it became clear that the children played only with children of the same ethnicity—that there was no mixing of the races, but there were comments about "the others." This project unfolded naturally from the need to teach the children how to bridge differences and make friends. It kept unfolding as it opened into all areas of the curriculum. This unit started the first week of school and formally lasted two months.

Cushner (1999) states that culture has two dimensions. The first dimension is objective and consists of the surface parts of a culture—artifacts, food, clothing. These are the areas upon which schools tend to focus. The second dimension is deeper and more subjective—attitudes, values, and beliefs. Lipson and Romatowski (1983) caution us against giving only stereotypic information to our students via the first dimension. Therefore, it was in the second dimension which we wanted to focus our energies.

We believed kindergarten was an appropriate place to start. This belief was grounded in two points. First, the children in our kindergarten class were already expressing--verbally and with their behavior--racist, prejudicial and stereotypic beliefs. Latino children refused to play with Asian-American children. Two of our African-

American children called Middle Eastern children disrespectful names. One Anglo child announced to the class that our child from Nigeria "stinks and talks funny."

The second point was grounded in the research (Derman-Sparks, 1989). According to this research, very young children begin their awareness of differences and, by pre-school, they have started absorbing the spoken and unspoken messages of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia. By age three, gender and racial differences are noticed. This awareness continues to grow, develop, and become more internalized until ages 10 or 11 when a more complete understanding occurs. Derman-Sparks suggests that the proper time for children to begin developing anti-bias views is in early childhood, when they are still in the beginning stages of forming these views and values. She further states that in order to develop these anti-bias views, specific, value-laden approaches must be taken: differences are good, prejudices are not.

The benefit to all the children, including those of the dominant culture, of a strong anti-bias curriculum is well documented by Lipson and Romatowski (1983). They detail a midwestern, metropolitan school system in the late 1970's which—in the middle of "America's heartland"--already had over 6,000 school children whose primary language was not English. Ravitch and Viteritti (1996) echo this view when they state that the schools which may have worked in this country one hundred years ago no longer fit the needs of our current society.

Swick, Boutte, and Van Scoy (1996) delineate four behavior patterns which are essential to the integration of multicultural learning. The first is the nurturance of authentic and positive self-esteem. Derman-Sparks (1989) gives examples of how we, as a nation, unintentionally reinforce the demeaning of certain racial identities. For

instance, she states that the dictionary lists 44 positive meanings for the word "white," while listing 60 negative meanings for the word "black." Another example she gives is the still-popular children's book, Harry the Dirty Dog (Zion, 1956). This is a story where a white dog falls into a coal bin and becomes all black. The rest of the story is about the efforts to become white and therefore clean and good and lovable again. To counteract this, in our class, we read three to six books daily which encouraged ethnic pride.

Gallimore and Goldenberg (1996) remind us that in a multicultural society, it is imperative that everyone's heritage be treated with respect, and that differences need to be viewed as strengths which add to the whole rather than as deficits which need to be remedied to fit the dominant culture. How do we do this? The appreciation of others must begin with an appreciation of self (Lipson and Romatowski, 1983). They state that it is clearly one of a teacher's most important tasks to nurture each child's positive sense of self. We started our unit with the sub-theme, "My Self and My Feelings." We read S. Otto Svend's book, Tim and Trisha (1976). The book is a story about an ugly, scary-looking boy troll befriending a little girl. We discussed the importance of looking inside and judging not "by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." We challenged the students to make friends with children who did not look like them, just as the little girl in the storybook made friends with the boy troll. We asked the children to play with one new friend that day and to tell the class about it. "I didn't know black kids like to swing," said Jorge. Thus the barriers started to fall. The children ran in from recess, holding hands and hugging their new friends. All we did was suggest; their minds and hearts were ready to accept.

All students made a book about each child—getting beyond the surface pictures to in-depth study. Every child drew a picture of the student being studied and dictated a story about why they like that student. This was probably the biggest motivator for pre-reading skills we had; students delighted in taking home and "reading" their biographies to their families.

The use of our "Star of the Week" bulletin board and our "All About Me" books contributed to the first essential behavior pattern in the schema of Swick, Boutte, and Van Scoy, (1996): authentic and positive self-esteem. In our class, one child each week was the "Star of the Week." This child would bring in photographs of him/herself, his/her family, pets, etc. A bulletin board was created using the photographs, illustrations the child had made, listings of the child's favorite book, food, etc.

The second behavior pattern in Swick, Boutte and Van Scoy's (1996) schema is the promotion of positive, nurturing self-other relationships. Gallimore and Goldenberg (1996) remind us that we must look at commonalities as well as differences. Banks and Banks (1997) tell us that the United States consists of a core culture in addition to the many subcultures upon which we sometimes tend to focus. Hence, our theme, "We Are All Alike; We Are All Different" became a natural outgrowth of our experience, our expertise, and the literature. Our theme was borrowed from the Chaltenham Elementary School kindergartens book of the same title.

In addition, we were very aware that, as Wardle (1996) reminds us, not all children from the same cultural background will think, act, or believe the same way. We made it a point to stress the individuality and uniqueness of each one of us, even though

Daily journal writing (dictating/drawing) followed naturally as a way to express feelings in a safe atmosphere where we encouraged rather than judged their writing. "Here is Ebony. I drew Ebony. I like her. I didn't use to like her. She is black." Using these daily dictations as authentic assessment, we saw the focus change from "myself and my feelings" to "myself and others." This emerged easily and naturally from the children as they gained in social skills and empathy for others. The number of unkind comments decreased while the number of caring comments and actions of concern increased.

A logical outgrowth included directed dramatic play in practicing feelings (e.g., "show me mad, show me sad") and verbalizing ways to solve conflict: "I didn't hit Sheiran today. I told her, 'I'm mad! I don't like that!'"

We read and discussed subject matter-related books. Through songs, arts, crafts, and stories, we introduced the children to the world's ethnicities.

We became more focused, studying skin color, hair/color/texture, eye color/shape and other visual differences. .We created math and science projects around differences and likenesses. We measured and compared height, eye color, and so on. We used magnifying glasses to look at skin. We graphed students' likes and dislikes—and the students realized and expressed that people can like different things, act differently, be different, and still be friends. "Johnny and Lora felt different but they are both Mexican." We graphed student's feelings; the children concluded that sometimes one must ask and not stereotype. "Mrs. Anicich likes strawberry ice cream the best and she's white, but so do Jorge and Lora and they're Mexican." Students helped each other with these projects—working side by side with classmates whom they had shunned in September.

The third behavior pattern, according to Swick, Boutte, and Van Scoy (1996) is the nurturing of cultural strengths of all people. Derman-Sparks (1989) informs us that contact with children from various racial and ethnic groups is not enough to encourage positive cultural attitudes. Rather, active intervention by the teacher is necessary. Positive cultural attitudes will not occur simply by proximity.

One basic activity was the "shoe game." We learned this activity from Starting Small: Teaching Tolerance in Preschool and the Early Grades, a book published by Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center (1997). We stood in a circle so that we could each see everyone's shoes. Then we talked about how the shoes were the same and how they were different. Some had laces, some had velcro. Some were sandals, some were tennis shoes. Each person had two shoes, each pair covered someone's feet. Students were able to verbalize that the shoes were all different and they were all the same. We then took the next step and verbalized that our class was just like that; we were all different and we were all the same.

The fourth behavior pattern essential for integrating multicultural learning is the promotion of collaborative relationships among different cultures. The research of Gallimore and Goldenberg (1996) clearly demonstrates the need for teachers to involve parents in the child's academic learning in kindergarten. Their study establishes a direct positive correlation between teachers' attempts to involve parents and children's academic success in kindergarten. Keeping this in mind, we made parents an integral part of our program. As we began to look at different countries of origin, parents were swept up with the excitement of their children. Parents whom we had never seen on campus before came into our classroom, at first out of curiosity. They stayed to help with

the journal dictations and discussions. They shared songs, native languages, native foods, crafts, toys. They contributed pictures of homelands and relatives and these decorated one wall in our classroom. They shared their stories and made their cultures come alive for all of us. They helped with our "Star of the Week" bulletin board. They decorated other parts of the classroom with artifacts from their culture. This fits into the suggestions of Swick, Boutte, and Van Scoy (1996) that classroom displays represent diverse cultural backgrounds including children's personal works and materials loaned by parents. These researchers also suggest having parents volunteer in the classroom. We followed this suggestion. Parents came and presented short lessons about themselves, their relatives and friends, and their culture. Many volunteered on a weekly basis in the classroom. The parents started to develop friendships with other parents whose cultural backgrounds were different from their own, an unplanned extra benefit for our class community.

To culminate our project, we held a week-long celebration using components of Cushner's (1999) first dimension of culture (artifacts, food, clothing) to highlight our children's learning in Cushner's second dimension (attitudes, values, beliefs). We divided the class into four heterogeneous groups for our "center" activities. The groups rotated daily, so that all groups completed each activity within one week. On any given day, one group made indigenous musical instruments and art. Another made collages, dictating stories about the pictures depicting people of all ethnicities and abilities. Each child created his/her own book of people. Most dramatic, we created our Culture Quilt using the two remaining groups. Each child chose a felt square which they determined matched their skin color. In one group, that square was used to create their portrait, with

the addition of fabric paints, yarn, cloth, buttons, movable eyes and glue. In the other group, the children outlined their hands on their skin-color squares. A kind of magical excitement gripped the process of the children picking a color square, choosing all their materials and creating mirror images of themselves. The children ran and grabbed their parents and other visitors to come and look at their portrait, their handprint—"See! See! It's Me! It's Andy! It's Mercy!"

Friday was the day for assembling the Culture Quilt and inviting the parents to a pot luck cultural food feast. By Thursday, the children completed their books and placed them in our class library; they displayed their musical instruments and soapstone bead necklaces; their family history photographs covered the walls, and we readied all the materials for the quilt assembly. Friday came. The room filled with the scents of Indian, Asian, Middle Eastern, African, Mexican, Latin American, European, Indigenous American, European, American foods—from American meat loaf to German pancakes to chitlins to enchiladas to Indian beriani. Indigenous American music played in the background; some children danced a circle dance while others played class-made elderberry clappers and drums. Still others grabbed parents (not necessarily their own) to read the books we made in class. We rang the bell. It was time to assemble the quilt.

The children came together in a large circle—black and white, brown and yellow, together—no barriers between them. Into the center of the circle, we placed the quilt backing. We handed the children their felt portraits and applied glue to the backing as all the children came forward to add their portrait. Even the animals in the classroom (a rabbit and a tarantula) had portrait squares. The felt handprints formed the boarder. We—children and adults alike—stood back and beheld our finished creation. There was a

silence—not the silence of fear, hatred, misunderstandings, but a silence of wonder and a realization that—as the quilt is titled, "We Are All Alike; We Are All Different."

The individual portraits, beautiful in themselves, when put together, became much bigger than the individual parts. It represented the growing sense of community in the classroom. The magic in the quilt was in the coming together of children and adults. The magic was in the quilt because it was an expression of what we had learned. In the beginning there was no awareness other than stereotypes, but standing by the Culture Quilt we knew that each face—these new friends that we had made—no matter what ethnicity, class, or ability—has equal value and is necessary to the whole. For every difference that made us unique, we saw a common thread connecting us all.

Epilogue

The magic continued; three months later the children still gathered to look at the quilt they had created. By their conversations, it was obvious that the quilt—and the lessons it represents—was still important to them. Three months later, the children were still walking hand in hand.

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Cultural Awareness Education in Early Childhood Education

Maggie Anicich and Rea Kirk

Abstract

We have developed a kindergarten curriculum for cultural awareness. This research-based curriculum involves daily journal writing (dictating/drawing), directed dramatic play, picture books of different cultures, ethnic songs, arts and crafts, and subject-related books. Activities also include graphing and charting skin color, hair color/texture, eye color/shape, and other visual differences. The children study each other in depth; all students make a book about each child—getting beyond surface pictures. Feelings and fears are openly expressed. The culminating activity is a Culture Quilt. The children choose a felt square which they determine matches their skin color. That square is used to create their portrait. The quilt creates a class portrait entitled, "We Are All Alike; We Are All Different."